Pollutant likely migrated via canal

By Steve Yozwiak
The Arizona Republic

A chemical used in making rocket fuel likely migrated from a Nevada chemical plant via the Central Arizona Project canal into Valley water supplies, federal and state officials said Wednesday.

There is no immediate health threat believed posed by the presence of the chemical perchlorate, said Air Force Lt. Col. Dan Rogers, co-chairman of a federal-state environmental task force investigating the possible health and environmental effects of the pollutant.

However, officials are unsure how low doses of the chemical might affect human health. In high doses, it affects the thyroid, which regulates growth and metabolism. The presence of perchlorate closed nearly 20 water wells last year near Sacramento.

Since then, it has been detected in Lake Mead, which supplies water to Las Vegas, and downstream in the Colorado River, which feeds into the CAP canal, which carries water 336 miles from the California line to Phoenix and Tucson.

Amy Rezzonico, a spokeswoman for the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, said the chemical recently was detected in the CAP canal. However, the highest levels detected were less than what is believed to pose a health threat under California standards, she said.

Arizona has no health standard for perchlorate. The Environmental Protection Agency is expected to recommend standards next month when toxicology studies are completed.

Meanwhile, environmental officials will meet today in Phoenix to discuss how best to deal with the potential environmental threat. The daylong session is open to the public. It starts at 8:30 a.m. at Arizona State University West, 4701 W. Thunderbird Road.

Rogers said the chemical was made during the 1970s and '80s by Kerr-McGee Corp. at a plant in Henderson, Nev. Officials believe perchlorate migrated from that plant, though the groundwater, into nearby Lake Mead, and from there into the Colorado River.

The most common use of the chemical is in rocket fuel used by NASA and for military weaponry.